

Wake Up!



More and more Americans are robbing their bodies of sleep, cheating themselves out of an hour or more a day, experts say.

Sleep needs vary—some folks can get by with five or fewer hours, and some need 10 or more. But in general, Americans need an average of eight hours a night, and many are getting less than seven.

Too little sleep leads to worn-out adults, cranky kids, and exhausted teens. Children who are short-changed on sleep are more likely to fall asleep in school, researchers say. And tired people can drift

off in meetings or during lectures, or—dangerously—while driving.

When people don't get enough sleep, they build up what experts call a "sleep debt." The debt accumulates night after night: If you get one hour less sleep than you need each night for eight nights in a row, your brain will need sleep as desperately as if you had stayed up all night, says sleep researcher, William Dement of Stanford University.

People with large sleep debts take longer to react to challenging situations. Tired people are more

likely to make math errors, drop things and become emotionally distant from their families, friends and colleagues, he says. Sleep debt also takes a toll on their motor and intellectual functions, raising their risk of being in a traffic mishap.

One of the most dangerous things about sleepy drivers is that they don't know they're sleepy. Researchers have asked thousands of people over the years if they are sleepy, only to be told no—just before the people fall asleep. What does this mean? Many people don't know whether they are sleepy, when they are sleepy, or why they are sleepy. When driving, don't think you can tough it out if you're sleepy but only a few miles from your destination. If you are tired enough, you can fall asleep anywhere.

Even though you may not realize you are sleepy, your body will give you warning signs:

- Your eyes close or go out of focus.
- You have trouble keeping your head up.
- You can't stop yawning.
- You have wandering, disconnected thoughts.
- You don't remember driving the last few miles.
- You drift between lanes, tailgate or miss traffic signs.

• You keep jerking the car back into the lane.
• You have drifted off the road and narrowly missed crashes.

If you experience any of these signs, turning up the radio, chewing gum or opening your windows won't keep you awake. The only short-term solution is to pull over at a safe place and take a short nap or drink something with caffeine. The only long-term solution is prevention—starting out well rested after a good night's sleep.

Here are some ways you can prevent falling asleep at the wheel.

- Start any trip by getting enough sleep the night before. Plan to drive during times of day when you are normally awake, and stay overnight rather than travel straight through.

- Avoid driving during your body's "down time." Take a mid-afternoon break and find a place to sleep between midnight and 6 a.m.

- Talk with your passenger if you have someone else in the car. A passenger also can let you know when you are showing signs of sleepiness. If your passenger thinks you are getting sleepy, let him drive or pull over and sleep.

- Make sure people in the front seats of the car are awake. A person who needs rest should go to the back seat, buckle up, and sleep.

- Schedule a break every two hours or every 100 miles. Stop sooner if you show any danger signs of sleepiness. During your break, take a nap, stretch, take a walk, and get some exercise before getting back into the car. 

For more information about drowsy driving, write to the National Sleep Foundation, 729 15th Street, NW 4th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20005 or visit www.sleepfoundation.org.

Getting the Sleep You Need

Sleep needs vary by age. Toddlers and preschoolers need 11 to 12 hours of sleep, plus naps. School-age children need about 10 hours. Teens need an average of 9 1/4 hours a night. One study showed that most get less than 8 1/2. Adults' sleep needs vary, but in general, they need 8 hours a night. The average adult gets 6 hours 57 minutes on weeknights, 7 hours 31 minutes on weekends.

There are ways to make sure you can get a good night's sleep. Here are some of them:

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
 - Exercise regularly, but complete the workout at least three hours before bedtime.
 - Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine, such as taking a bath or reading a book.
 - Associate your bed with sleep; don't work or watch television.
 - Avoid caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate), nicotine and alcohol late in the day.
- [You want to fall asleep, not pass out.—Ed.]*